

# Supporting Beginning Readers in Reading to Learn: A Comprehension Strategy

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This teaching tip outlines a comprehension strategy to support early primary students in reading to learn while learning to read.

**"H**ow can we support our early and emergent readers to read and understand informational texts?" we asked each other following a staff meeting. Our school's administrators had just outlined a new schoolwide goal to improve our students' reading comprehension of informational texts. As grade 1 teachers, we believed that our students were capable of developing comprehension skills as they continued to acquire other early reading skills (Dooley & Matthews, 2009). To help our students read to learn while learning to read (see, e.g., Robb, 2002), we collaboratively created a comprehension strategy called Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect.

We understand comprehension as an active process of constructing meaning whereby a young reader builds meaning (Dooley & Matthews, 2009) by interacting deeply with the text (McKeown, Beck, & Blake, 2009). We recognize that young children construct meaning in ways that may differ from older children and adults (Dooley & Matthews, 2009). We believe that "learning to read and reading to learn should be happening simultaneously and continuously from preschool through middle school—and perhaps beyond" (Robb, 2002, p. 24) and in conjunction with instruction in other early literacy skills (Dooley & Matthews, 2009). We connect our strategy to the research and offer suggestions to guide its implementation in early primary classrooms.

## What Is the Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect Strategy?

The strategy is designed to support beginning readers in reading and understanding informational texts by facilitating close interactions between readers

and text (see, e.g., McKeown et al., 2009) by mirroring the thinking processes that proficient readers may do automatically (see, e.g., Neufeld, 2005). The strategy is designed to be used flexibly and can be altered to respond to the different demands particular informational texts present and to the diversity of abilities and practices of beginning readers. As a result, beginning readers may cycle through the strategy several times in the reading of a text. We describe each of the five steps of the strategy in turn. (See Table 1 for a summary of strategy steps.)

### Step 1: Read

The first step in the strategy is designed to help beginning readers recognize and respond to the particular challenges informational texts present for reading and understanding. These challenges may differ from those in narrative texts because informational texts may present material through many sources of information, including the text itself, illustrations, captions, diagrams, and labels. The beginning reader must recognize that each text feature may represent information that is supplementary to the information discussed in sentence form (Stead, 2002). The first step of the strategy prompts beginning readers to read each source of informa-

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**Table 1**  
**Summary of the Strategy**

1. *Read*: The reader reads the text as well as text features and images.
2. *Stop*: The reader stops reading frequently to process unfamiliar terms and concepts.
3. *Think*: The reader thinks about structural elements, such as signal words, and how they support understanding. The reader is prompted to begin synthesizing information.
4. *Ask*: The reader asks the author questions about the text to support comprehension.
5. *Connect*: The reader considers other information he or she may know about the subject matter and makes connections to personal experiences, other texts, and/or world events.

tion presented in the text by scanning images, reading labels, considering diagrams, and reading prose.

In the Read step of the strategy, beginning readers might ask,

- Where is the information on this page or in this book?
- Have I looked at the pictures, labels, diagrams, and other text features?

### Step 2: Stop

The second step of the strategy reminds beginning readers to stop frequently when reading informational texts. This is necessary because informational texts are often densely written and use content-specific vocabulary that may be unfamiliar and difficult for children to understand (Klein, 2008). The frequency of stopping when reading informational texts may depend on the difficulty of the text, the number and type of text features, and the student's experience with using the strategy. The Stop step creates space for gradually "connecting and integrating information" (McKeown et al., 2009, p. 28) through the Think, Ask, and Connect steps.

In the Stop step, beginning readers may stop after reading a section of text (e.g., a sentence, a short paragraph, or a set of pictures). Beginning readers might ask,

- Do I think I understand the information?
- Do I need to reread a section?

### Step 3: Think

The third step of the strategy encourages beginning readers to think about what they have read by recognizing how the text structure can support the meaning presented in the text. In addition, this step provides opportunities for the beginning reader to summarize information from a variety of sources. As beginning readers think about what they have read, they may identify structural elements such as keywords or formatting that signal the organization of the piece so that they can use this information to support comprehension (e.g., the words *first* and *next* in procedural texts may help readers identify that the text is communicating information about a sequence, and text written in a list may help the reader identify a descriptive structure; Dymock & Nicholson, 2010).

To further support comprehension, the Think step prompts readers to summarize and synthesize information presented in print and in text features and to identify questions they have about the information presented (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010).

In the Think step of the strategy, beginning readers might ask,

- Did the author give me any clues in the ways he or she organized the text?
- What do the words in the text mean?
- How does this match the information from the pictures and other text features?

### Step 4: Ask

The fourth step of the strategy invites beginning readers into a dialogue with the author. In this step, students vocalize questions about the content of the text (see, e.g., Wilhelm, 2007). When we invited the beginning readers to ask questions about the text in our classes, our young students started to talk with the author as though he or she were present and referred to the author by name when asking questions. The process of asking questions about the text invites beginning readers to engage deeply with the text to construct meaning (see, e.g., Dymock & Nicholson, 2010).

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- Compared with narrative texts, what different demands do informational texts place on beginning readers?
- Are informational texts available to my students in my classroom library?
- How frequently do I read aloud from informational texts to my students?

In the Ask step, beginning readers might ask,

- What is the author trying to tell me?
- Why would the author want me to know that?
- Why did the author show me the information this way?

### Step 5: Connect

The fifth stage of the strategy encourages beginning readers to connect what they have read to their prior knowledge (Dymock & Nicholson, 2010) by making text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world connections. These connections help readers use what is known to help comprehend new information (Neufeld, 2005).

In the Connect step of the Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect strategy, beginning readers might ask,

- What does this information remind me of?
- Have I seen something like this before?
- Do I know any other information about this topic?

## Introducing the Strategy to Beginning Readers

We found that a highly scaffolded read-aloud/think-aloud process (e.g., Ness & Kenny, 2016) was very helpful when we introduced the strategy to our grade 1 classes. We modeled the use of the strategy repeatedly using very simple informational texts, and we then guided students through other simple informational texts. After several weeks of modeling and guided practice,

our young students started to use the strategy on their own when reading independently. In Table 2, we show what a read-aloud/think-aloud process might sound like through each step of the strategy when a teacher introduces the strategy to beginning readers.

## Further Considerations

As stated previously, the Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect strategy is designed to be used flexibly and can be adapted to meet the needs of beginning readers with particular abilities in diverse settings. Before introducing the strategy to a particular group of beginning readers, we encourage educators to consider students' prior learning, text selection, and multimodal support.

### Prior Learning

We encourage educators to consider their students' prior learning. The strategy invites beginning readers to make connections to the texts they read. To do this effectively, young readers need to understand how to make connections when reading. When we introduced the strategy in our classes, most students were successful with making text-to-self connections, some could make text-to-text connections, and a few could make text-to-world connections. In addition, the strategy asks students to consider how text structures can support the author's intended meaning. In our classes, we introduced students to procedural texts with signal words (e.g., *first*, *next*) within a guided reading context prior to teaching the strategy. We used our understandings of students'

**Table 2**

**A Sample of Scaffolding the Strategy Through Read-Aloud/Think-Aloud**

*Read:* "I see there are a few pictures on this page. I am going to cover part of this page so I can really concentrate on the information in the pictures. What information do I see in each of the pictures? Oh, some pictures have the same information, but I see some more details in some of the pictures."

*Stop:* "There was a lot of information in those pictures. I am going to stop to make sure I remember and understand all of that information."

*Think:* "I wonder if I can remember all that information in the pictures. Hmm. I saw a really big picture and some smaller pictures. Am I forgetting anything? Oh, yes, I saw some labels, too."

*Ask:* "I noticed that not all of the pictures seemed to be about exactly the same thing. I wonder, why is this picture bigger than the others? Is it trying to tell me something?...Why would the author want me to know that?"

*Connect:* "These illustrations make me think of [subject content]. It reminds me of a book we have in our classroom reading bins." Stop to show the book. "But I think this book has some different information."

prior knowledge as the starting point of instruction and continued to support students in extending their abilities in these areas.

### Text Selection

We encourage educators to carefully select the informational text they use when modeling the use of the strategy. In our classes, we selected a simple text that had short sentences, had multiple text features, and was written about a topic that was interesting to our students.

When we introduced the strategy to our students, we only read through one page of a text. We wanted to emphasize to the children that we were encouraging a deep reading of the text rather than reading a large quantity of pages. We used an informational text from our school library, but the strategy can be used with simple, leveled informational texts, trade books, and websites. Some sample informational texts that may be useful for beginning readers include the following:

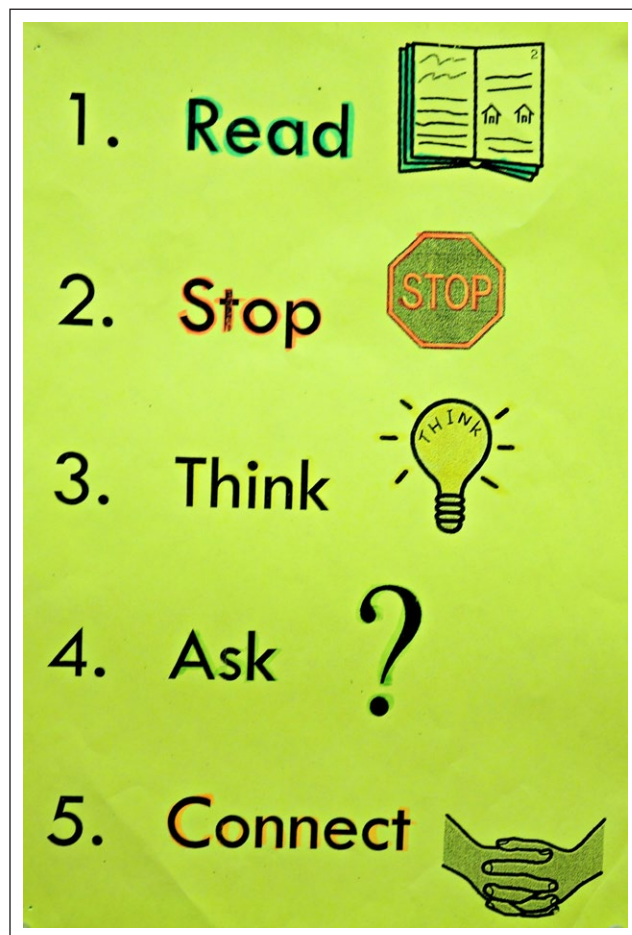
- National Geographic Kids website: [kids.nationalgeographic.com](http://kids.nationalgeographic.com)
- PebbleGo leveled text databases (free trial available): <https://www.pebblego.com/login/index.html>
- Rau, D. (2006). *Hot and bright: A book about the sun*. North Mankato, MN: Picture Window.
- Troupe, T.K. (2014). *Glowing with electricity: Science adventures with Glenda the origami firefly*. North Mankato, MN: Picture Window.

### Multimodal Support

We encourage educators to consider how they might further support their beginning readers through multimodal resources. In our classrooms, we found it useful to make a very simple poster for students to reference (see Figure 1). We further supported our students' use of the strategy by asking them to create gestures to help them remember each step of the strategy (see Table 3).

We also encourage educators to consider how students might use a graphic organizer to support the comprehension process. We found it helpful to provide opportunities for our students to draw or write their understandings of the informational text read on a graphic organizer. To support our students, we selected graphic organizers (T-charts, Venn diagrams, etc.) according to the demands of the particular informational text read.

**Figure 1**  
Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect Strategy  
Classroom Poster



**Table 3**  
Gestures to Support the Meaning of the Strategy Steps

*Read:* Hands open like a book.

*Stop:* Hold hand up like a stop sign.

*Think:* Point to the head.

*Ask:* Make a question mark in the air.

*Connect:* Link both hands.

### Summary

Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect is a strategy designed to support beginning readers in reading and understanding informational texts. In our prac-



## TAKE ACTION!

1. Evaluate students' prior learning and experience with informational text forms.
2. Select a simple informational text with a variety of text features.
3. Model and remodel the use of the strategy through a read-aloud or think-aloud.
4. Support students with multimodal supports (poster, gestures).
5. Gradually guide students toward independent practice.

tices, we found the strategy very useful in helping our beginning readers navigate the complexities of informational text and guiding them toward a deep construction of meaning. We invite other educators of beginning readers to use this comprehension strategy as a way to “help children learn to read at the same time they read to learn” (Moss, 2005, p. 50).

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